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DEPT FOR EUR/WE LEVIN; DRL/IRF HANFORD, RIGGS

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SUBJECT: IRF AMBASSADOR HANFORD REVIEWS THREATS AND NEXT STEPS WITH VATICAN

Classified By: CDA D. Brent Hardt for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

1. (SBU) During his December 1 - 4 visit to the Vatican, Ambassador at large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford reviewed U.S. religious freedom concerns and priorities with Holy See Foreign Minister Archbishop Giovanni Lajolo and other senior officials. Vatican officials highlighted their concerns over the persecution of Christians in China, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, India and Sudan. They also emphasized the importance of juridical recognition to protect churches from government pressure and manipulation, specifically in Russia and Vietnam. Many Vatican concerns track with the recently released IRF report, but the Holy See urged continued U.S. pressure on countries of concern. End Summary.

Religious Liberty Linked to Other Freedoms

2. (C) In a December 3 meeting with the Holy See's Secretary for Relations with States Archbishop Giovanni

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Lajolo, Ambassador for International Religious Freedom John Hanford emphasized that the U.S. was working to advance religious freedom for Catholics and those of other religions wherever it is under threat. The priority the U.S. attaches to this issue, Hanford said, is reflected in the expansion in staff in the State Department's Office of Religious Freedom, which is charged with monitoring problems and advocating with countries of concern for greater freedom. Archbishop Lajolo welcomed the U.S. focus on religious freedom, observing, "when there is no religious liberty, there is no political liberty -- all freedoms are connected."

China Top Vatican Priority

3. (C) Lajolo made clear that China is the Holy See's priority religious freedom concern. He pointed out that the Holy See had repeatedly made known to China that they had nothing to fear from greater freedom for Catholics. He noted that the Chinese often cite Poland as an example of how the Church helped topple a communist government, but that the two cases were completely different. The Vatican has pointed out that the percentage of Catholics in China is minuscule compared to Poland -- 8-30 million in a country of well over a billion people -- but this has yet to assuage Chinese anxieties.

4. (C) Ambassador Hanford observed that he has devoted considerable focus to China and has visited the country twice, in each case raising Catholic concerns with various Chinese authorities. Hanford said he has heard a standard litany of four reasons why no progress is possible: Holy See relations with Taiwan, the Pope's decision to canonize Chinese saints on a sensitive day for the Chinese government, the need for a stronger apology from the Pope for this decision, and the need for the Holy See to make a gesture toward the Chinese government. Hanford said he understood that in regard publicly stated its willingness to shift relations from Taiwan to the PRC swiftly should the Chinese open up that possibility. He said he also emphasized to Chinese authorities that the Pope's apology for the date of the canonization had been strong and was more than might have been expected.

5. (C) Lajolo noted that the Vatican receives occasional signals from the Chinese that they want to get in touch and begin a dialogue with the Embassy in Rome, but they are

never sure who they will be dealing with and whether the contact would be authorized or could be a trap in which the Chinese authorities could accuse the Vatican of trying to work through sec ret channels. Lajolo said the Holy See's

impression was that attitudes at the top of the Chinese hierarchy were more open to contact, but that at the middle and lower levels, there was considerably more resistance. Ambassador Hanford noted that senior officials with whom he had met often displayed a naive view of Christianity and the differences among various Christian groups. Overall, Hanford noted that he had been disappointed with the Chinese response to the concerns the U.S. had raised. Lajolo shared Hanford's disappointment, but said it was the Church's responsibility to "try and try again." In a separate meeting, Frank Dewane of the Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace noted that the Chinese are aware of the presence of Catholic priests in China for professional reasons. For example, Jesuit and Maryknoll professors currently serve on Chinese university faculties, and their presence offers the Holy See a small window into the country.

Keeping Pressure on Saudi Arabia

16. (C) Asked about the situation in Saudi Arabia, whose inclusion on the list of countries of particular concern (CPC) was welcomed by the Holy See, Hanford said the U.S. wanted to nudge the government even though they were taking some positive steps. He cited the Saudis' efforts to replace school books that described other faiths in "horrible" ways. Hanford noted that he had met with the Italian ambassador to Saudi Arabia, who was very active in working with Catholic communities in Saudi Arabia to facilitate private Catholic services. He said the Saudis know Masses are taking place and that there are priests in the country; they are willing to tolerate this as long as no further effort is made to regularize their presence and activities. Lajolo said he appreciates that the Saudi royal family is under pressure, but he believes it is also vital for Catholics and other Christians to be able to worship without fear in the kingdom.

Bridging Gaps Between Theory and Practice

17. (SBU) In separate meetings with Under-Secretary Frank Dewane of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and the Vatican-linked Sant'Egidio Community, Hanford was told that although the situation in some countries may look acceptable on paper, the situation on the ground faced by priests and religious communities is frequently much worse. Dewane said he had reviewed the most recent IRF report and found that the assessments were not always as "crisp" as they could be. He feared that international political pressures came into play in some country reports. He suggested that the Holy See might be more critical of certain countries, behavior, particularly that of Pakistan and India. Hanford responded that the U.S. strives for complete accuracy and honesty in drafting the report and would welcome Vatican information and feedback if officials felt the report was at all "whitewashing" a country's record.

"Don't Let Pakistan Off the Hook"

18. (C) Using virtually identical language, Monsignor Dewane and Sant'Egidio's Claudio Betti both urged Hanford emphatically "not to let Pakistan off the hook." Citing Pakistan's blasphemy laws and persecution of Christians, Dewane said many Pakistanis who had been charged under the blasphemy ordinances were forced to flee the country in

fear of their lives rather than fight the charges in Pakistan. In the broader Middle East, Dewane emphasized that the U.S. must recognize the growing flight of Christians from the Middle East. "Parents do not see a future for their children there," he said. Maronite (Catholic) Bishop El-Hachem in Lebanon recently told Dewane that "soon there'll be no one left." Dewane pointed out that it is a human rights violation to be driven out of one's country.

While the Holy See continues to have problems in India, he said the Vatican views the IRF country report on India as encouragement to the new Indian government to go further in protecting its religious minorities and continuing the repeal of non-conversion laws as was recently seen in Tamil Nadu.

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thus the growth and reach of the church. Sant'Egidio reps pointed to problems in Sudan, where the Community has been working for several years to protect churches and Christians. Sant'Egidio's Fabio Riccardi cited two

instances where his direct appeal to contacts in the Sudanese government had saved Christian churches from the bull-dozers.

Comment

110. (C) Ambassador Hanford's participation in Embassy's conference on religious freedom and his meetings with Vatican officials reinforced a crucial area of common interest between the USG and the Holy See and helped focus attention on problem areas. Rooted in its interest in ensuring freedom for Catholics to worship worldwide, the Holy See has become a strong advocate for freedom for all faiths. Embassy greatly appreciates Ambassador Hanford's engagement and will maintain a close dialogue with the Holy See to share perspectives on areas of concern where the Holy See's "on the ground" perspective may offer insights on ways forward.

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